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Head of a Jester

Gregory Davies

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Alison Stewart

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, astewart1@unl.edu

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Shorter Notice

Head of a Jester

Gregory Davies and Alison Stewart

Bite your tongue, or is it your lip? That is precisely what the fool, or jester, in the *Large Head of a Jester* (fig. 89) is actively engaged in doing as he looks out in the direction of the viewer. A gift of the Trier-Fodor Foundation, this anonymous, German engraving of c. 1600 was acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, in 1985. Image and text of this medium-sized print measure 360 × 277 mm; the sheet 402 × 312 mm. The laid paper bears a watermark of a shield incorporating a fat fleur-de-lys, or possibly a clover leaf. Nevertheless, this fascinating engraving has not been discussed in the literature.¹

The jester is an impressive, if contradictory fellow. He wears a fool's cap replete with bells and cockscomb and several pins or badges of various sizes and shapes, yet he sports extremely well-clipped eyebrows and moustache, whose neatness directly contradicts his naturally ragged beard. But the beard appears to have been shaved at centre, where six warts, or related bumps, appear. Six more wart-like bumps cover the tip of his nose. The upper part of the jester's face is wrinkled and contorted as a result of biting his lip. His eyes, which include reflections of windows, look worried or distressed. What is the viewer to make of these various facial details, growths and expressions?

The inscription below the image seems to underscore laughter between the jester and another person:

If you laugh with me
Then I resemble you
(*Lachst du mit mir
So gleich Ich dir*)

If you mock mine
Then I laugh at yours
(*Spottest du meiner
So lach ich deiner*)

We are grateful to Brenda Rix at the Art Gallery of Ontario for supporting the publication of this article and for confirming visual information in the print. We are also grateful to Giulia Bartrum of the British Museum for assistance with unpublished material.

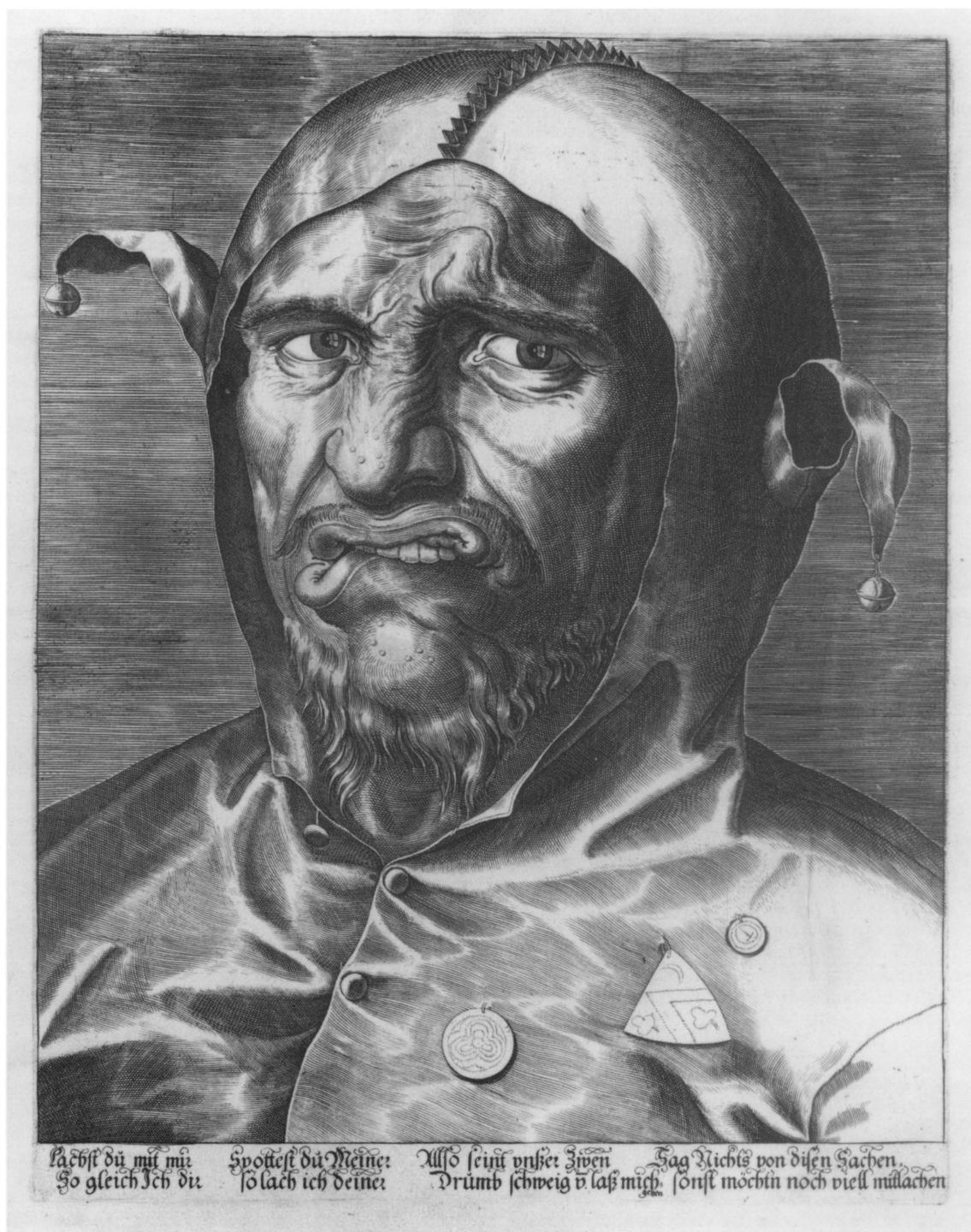
So are our seven [fools]
So be silent and leave me in peace
(*Allso seint unszer ziven
Drumb schweige vnd lasz mich gehen*)

Say nothing about these things
Else many will want to laugh with us.
(*Sag nichts von disen sachen
Sonst möchtn noch viell mitlachen*)

These lines imply that the image of the jester is also the likeness of the beholder. The two are one and the same. In this respect the illustration and text appear to follow a tradition of comic images, popular from the Renaissance into the nineteenth century, in which foolish characters are represented with an accompanying inscription that informs the viewer of his or her resemblance to those portrayed. In a related manner, a fool's likeness resembles that of his own bauble, at which he peers, as in an engraving by Hendrick Hondius dated 1642 entitled *Three Fools from a Carnival*, which credits Pieter Bruegel as designer.²

The joke of resemblance between fool and viewer is also made manifest when the viewer discovers a discrepancy between the number of fools illustrated (usually one, two or six) and the number recorded in the title or text, which always includes one more than shown. The number seven in the Toronto print's inscription proves significant, and has recently been discussed more broadly within the context of folly imagery in England and the Continent dating from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Notable examples include the etching *Contate bene. Noi siamo sette* by Giuseppe Caletti (1595–1620). It shows six figures – three men seated atop three donkeys. And in a mezzotint by Cornelis Dusart (1660–1704) entitled *Wy syn seven*, a donkey aids the travels of three simple-looking figures. An old tooth-

1. The Toronto engraving has only been published in *The Burlington Magazine*, cxxvii, June 1985, p. x, as an illustrated advertisement for the Christopher Mendez gallery, London.
2. D. Freedberg, *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, Tokyo 1999, cat. no. 95.



89. Anonymous Artist, *Head of a Jester*, engraving, 360 × 277 mm (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of the Trier-Fodor Foundation, 1985).

less woman carrying a child on her shoulders with a boot on its head, both riding on a donkey, are accompanied by a simple-looking man who holds a pig and wears a lantern on his head. The inscription below, clearly aimed at a large, international audience, reads from top to bottom: 'Wy syn seven', 'Wir sind sieben'; 'Nos sumus septem'; and 'Nous sommes sept' and 'We are seven'.³ Here the six figures, labelled seven, are woman, man, child, owl, pig and donkey.

Dusart's print, probably made in the late seventeenth century, was copied in an English lithograph from c. 1820, *The Seven Oddities*. Sheila O'Connell explains both images by posing the question, 'Which is the oddest? The fool, his ass, his owl, the child with a boot on his head, the country bumpkin, his pig – or the person who spends time looking at them?'⁴ O'Connell also cites a pamphlet from 1637 by John Taylor, a popular writer, *Wee be seaven*, which may have included a title-page illustration.⁵ These examples of the 'We are Seven' theme date later than the Toronto *Jester*, as do two prints from a recent exhibition in the British Museum – *Unser sind Siben/Nous sommes sept*, an anonymous German engraving from c. 1700 showing three people and three donkeys, as well as a contemporary English version of it recalling Caletti's print.⁶

These examples each include six comic figures, be they animal or human. They suggest in their explicit rendering of the number six that the Toronto *Jester* with its lone figure, but six warts and six bumps on nose and chin, inscribed seven, is either a variant on the visual tradition with six figures or an early example before the number of figures shown became standard. Although further research will underscore the specific historical place of the Toronto *Jester* within the 'We are Seven' visual and literary traditions, the print clearly relates to them, and appears to be an early visual example of the theme.

Like the number seven, the number two was employed in similar illustrated printed sheets that feature fools. In two seventeenth-century engravings entitled *Nous sommes trois*, two figures including a fool are shown despite the three mentioned in the title.⁷ Again, the title describes more figures than are included. Especially intriguing is Jacob van der Heyden's anamorphic *Unser sint drei/Nous sommes trois* engraving of 1629 in which two fools are visible, one over the other, requiring viewing right side up for the German image and upside down for the French.⁸ The viewer, of course, fills the

place of the additional or seemingly absent fool, regardless of the number of fools or individuals involved.⁹ In the case of the Toronto *Jester*, however, one fool is illustrated despite mention of seven.

Returning to the Toronto *Jester* we find that the text orders the addressee to be silent, while stating that both the speaker and addressee engage in laughter. A contradiction is articulated in the convolution of messages conveyed by the words and the jester's facial expression. We are told that the fool laughs, yet we note that he is biting his lip and thus suppressing his laughter. If we assume that we viewers are being addressed, can we 'be silent' on our recognition of this contradiction? Do the fool's words and gesture not conflict, and do we not laugh all the more at this observation? Conversely, if we interpret the words as self-reflexive, can we not help but laugh at the implicit contradiction that rests beneath the jester's call for 'silence', and his words which nonetheless speak to the very issue that must not be mentioned?

A similar expression of the contradictory or paradoxical, involving laughter and silence by means of lip-biting, is implied in Francois Rabelais's account of the childhood activities of Gargantua (1534). Describing the various actions of the young giant, Rabelais notes that he 'bit as he laughed and laughed as he bit'. This action is observed by the author in conjunction with similarly paradoxical activities, among which is included eating/drinking soup ('he drank while eating his soup', Rabelais observes).¹⁰ Can the contradictory references to lip-biting and laughter in the Toronto print be said to derive from an earlier tradition of activities that were treated as paradoxical and humorous? Does the image draw on an established visual tradition of lip-biting buffoons?

The Toronto jester is unusual among extant, contemporary images of fools. Far more in keeping with period depictions of the subject are portraits of jesters laughing out loud, or grinning behind raised hands that partially conceal the subject's face.¹¹ While some are rendered with contorted lips, these invariably find association with well-established gestures of lewdness in which the tongue is exposed, often to one side of the mouth. These latter depictions of fools find expression in images such as Quentin Massys's *Ill-Matched Lovers* (c. 1515–25, National Gallery of Art, Washington), and often display a marked relationship to the vulgar, mocking figures portrayed in contemporary pictures of Christ's Crucifixion.¹²

3. E. De Jongh and G. Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genreprints in the Netherlands 1550–1700*, Amsterdam and Ghent 1997, p. 23, figs. 49, 50.

4. S. O'Connell, *The Popular Print in England 1550–1850*, London 1999, pp. 122–23.

5. O'Connell, *op. cit.*, p. 233, n. 139.

6. 'Recent Acquisitions', exhibition, British Museum, London, August 2001, label copy for BM 2000.9.30.64; no catalogue. Information gratefully received from Giulia Bartrum.

7. De Jongh and Luijten, *op. cit.*, p. 23, fig. 47.

8. Hollstein 154 and De Jongh and Luijten, *op. cit.*, p. 23, fig. 48.

9. For recent discussion of viewer as absent fool and its dissemination, see S. O'Connell, *op. cit.*, pp. 54, 122. See also E. M.

Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 204–05.

10. F. Rabelais, *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, translated J. M. Cohen, London 1955, ch. 11, p. 62.

11. For the fool grinning behind his fingers, see Heinrich Vogtherr's woodcut of c. 1540 (Geisberg 1468) and a similar, later Dutch engraving, in De Jongh and Luijten, *op. cit.*, p. 22, fig. 46. For additional examples of the gesture of seeing through fingers, see *ibid.*, cat. no. 27.

12. For an illustration of the Massys' painting, see A. G. Stewart, *Unequal Lovers: A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art*, New York 1979, p. 68.

Images of jesters who command the viewer's silence, on the other hand, do appear in prints and paintings of the day. Among the prints compiled by the seventeenth-century French collector Michel de Marolles (now housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris), is at least one extant image of a fool who tells the viewer to be quiet ('*Tatez vous*').¹³ A painting in the Julius Held Collection, dated c. 1510–20, attributed to Quentin Massys and entitled *Allegory of Folly*, likewise alludes to silence in its depiction of a fool who engages the viewer while pressing an extended index finger to his closed lips. It is inscribed '*Mondeken toe*', an expression meaning 'be quiet' or 'keep your mouth shut'.¹⁴

Yet the facial expression adopted by the Toronto jester implies more than mere silence. While in English 'bite your tongue' means 'be quiet', the same expression in German is expressed as 'bite your lips' ('*sich auf die Lippen beißen*'). Although such an expression may not yet have been codified into a proverb during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a related meaning was recorded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in their *Deutsches Wörterbuch* in 1885, when biting the lip was understood as an expression of human emotion. In particular, lips were bitten and gnawed as a result of suppressed anger, impatience and restrained laughter. In the Toronto *Head of a Jester*, the bottom lip is clenched between the upper visible teeth and the unseen lower teeth, in a manner recalling words by Goethe ('*wie er die unterlippe zwischen die zähne klemmt*').¹⁵

Lips also undoubtedly carried meaning in German folklore, where a larger top lip indicated an angry aggressive person, while the ability to move both lips similarly denoted a future fight with an unknown person. In the Toronto print, the bottom lip appears somewhat larger, recalling the considerably larger bottom lip, which hung low, of one of Grimm's three spinners. In related manner, lips were considered such significant indicators of character in German culture that lips, like noses, were often cut off as punishment, according to old German law.¹⁶ Is the Toronto jester, we then ask, restraining his own laughter, suppressing his anger or mocking the viewer, thus himself? Is there yet another meaning that eludes us today?

Without a doubt the Toronto fool appears anguished. Perhaps this reflects some concern on the jester's part over the infectiousness of laughter and his desire to curtail it. 'Say nothing about these things, Else many will want to laugh with us', he observes. Has the jester become embroiled in some internal conflict over his desire to prevent others from laughing, despite his rôle as one who generates laughter, and might his expression convey his silence and suppression of

laughter as well as his anguish all at the same moment? We must again turn to the *Allegory of Folly* in the Held Collection, where the fool silences himself with the traditional finger-before-lips gesture, while a rooster adorning the fool's cap appears to cackle happily.

There is little doubt that the Toronto image is full of contradictions, both visual and textual. That the jester should appear distraught as a result of the conflict expressed through his words is perhaps not altogether surprising. An association between the character of the fool and some manner of conflict is not unfamiliar in jester prints of the period. A comparative structure of visual, textual and verbal communication may be found in Sebald Beham's *Little Buffoon* engraving of 1542, where a pudgy boy dressed in fool's clothing explains in a tangled banderole into which his hands are placed, '*On dir hab ich gerisen das ich mich hab beschisen*', or 'I have made so many exaggerated claims about you that I shat in my pants', thus I made a fool of myself.¹⁷ Here, as in the Toronto print, we find a humorous reference to some struggle or conflict involving a foolish character, and a textual accompaniment that indicates both self-reflexivity and/or direct address. 'You', in this instance, could once again indicate the viewer.

As perplexing as the specific interpretation of the Toronto fool may be for the modern viewer, one thing remains certain – it needs to be understood within the broader context of the body of ideas on fools and folly during the late sixteenth century. The transformation in folly imagery that took place in literature during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Northern Europe, especially German-speaking areas, points to a dramatic change in the meaning of folly by the year 1600, the approximate date of this print. This transformation of the meaning of folly from medieval to early modern attitudes was discussed by Barbara Könnker in the works of Sebastian Brant, Thomas Murner and Erasmus of Rotterdam, which were written in German and Latin. When Brant published his *Narrenschiff*, or *Ship of Fools*, at Basel in 1494, it met with enormous success, such that it can be best described as a late-fifteenth century best-seller.¹⁸

Könnker, and others, have noted Brant's link between folly, human fault and sin. For Brant, everyone was a fool – from the scholar who collects, but does not read, the numerous books in his library to the man who attempts to keep his wife faithful. Brant's world is obsessively negative and sinful and dwells on human weakness, what Barbara Swain called Brant's view of 'man's depravity'. However for Erasmus, in his *Moriae Encomium* or *Praise of Folly*, published in 1511, the fool becomes what Swain has called an 'ironic symbol of

13. De Jongh and Luijten, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

14. For the Held painting, see E. Tietze-Conrat, *Dwarfs and Jesters in Art*, London 1957, fig. 21 and p. 94.

15. J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, VI, Leipzig 1885, col. 1057, def. 2e.

16. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, edited by E. Hoffmann-

Krayer and H. Bächtold-Stäubli, v, Berlin and Leipzig 1932–33, col. 1310.

17. Hollstein, P.234.

18. B. Könnker, *Wesen und Wandlung der Narrenidee im Zeitalter des Humanismus. Brant-Murner-Erasmus*, Wiesbaden 1966, p. 2. For Brant, see pp. 1–133.

[humankind's] composite weakness and strength'.¹⁹ Regarded as the high point of folly literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Erasmus's book is centred not around Brant's world populated by sinful fools, but around Dame Folly, who employed ironic praise and paradox. Erasmus turned away from a one-sided didactic or polemical goal, and employed an ambiguity that Könneker described as comprising both 'yeses' and 'noes' and 'what ifs?'²⁰ Erasmus's approach to fools and folly is far more complex and centred in European humanism of the sixteenth century.

By the late sixteenth century, the image of both fool and folly had moved in the direction begun by Erasmus and away from the human dependence on God articulated by Brant. By the time of the Toronto *Jester*, then, the dominance of reason had given way to new attitudes on the contradiction and mysteriousness of human life, thereby opening up new possibilities for explanations of human existence.²¹ In the context of this late sixteenth-century reception of folly, the person of the fool came to be seen as something of a chimerical figure. The natural fool, lacking the intellectual refinement of learned men and women, was none the less capable of exposing the hidden truths of the human condition by his naïve actions and words. Conversely, the intelligent, artificial fool could most effectively expose the truth of human folly only by using his intellect to assume the rôle of the innocent. By the mid-sixteenth century the term '*fol saige*' had already begun to replace the conventional term '*sot*', indicating a sensitivity to the blurring of the margins between the fool's stupidity and wisdom.²² Perhaps it was at this time and for these reasons that 'We Seven' appeared for the first time in printed visual works.

The words and actions of the fool, in turn, could equally reveal his true intelligence or ineptitude. A precise quip

directed at a worthy target could ignite the laughter of an audience and, potentially, even the joyous praise of the victim, who might equally delight in the fool's display of wit. A clumsy delivery, however, would ensure the fool's downfall as he himself became subject to the audience's derision. In each instance, the audience member would be assured of his or her own intelligence in seeing beyond the fool's words and actions to his underlying wit or ineptitude. Yet the privilege accorded to the audience member who was permitted to laugh with (or at) the fool was to be enjoyed with a measure of caution, for as much as he or she was granted the pleasure of laughing at another's expense, the potential for a reversal of fortune was always lurking in the wings. The individual who failed to recognize the seeds of folly within himself could ultimately fall prey, like the incompetent fool, to the caustic laughter of others.

Reading once again the inscription beneath the Toronto jester we note the cautionary tone of the fool's words. Are these not the words of one who has recognized the seeds of folly that lie within us all? As we look at the image we find ourselves privileged spectators, gazing into a mirror on a likeness that speaks to the contradictory nature of the human condition. Perhaps the fool's internal conflict, registered in his expression, is a sign of the conflict that we ourselves should feel in responding to the print. Do we dare to laugh at this image or should we bite our lips? Should we not laugh at ourselves? Only a fool fails to recognize his own folly.

Without doubt the Toronto *Head of a Jester* is an intriguing, contradictory, if not mysterious image. The print provokes a wide range of questions and offers many avenues for interpretation. The authors have attempted to stimulate the reader's interest in this little-known engraving, while acknowledging the folly of their hoping to have done so.

19. Könneker, *op. cit.*, p. 2, and B. Swain, *Fools and Folly during the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, New York 1932, p. 2. The exhibition catalogue addressing fools during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, promises additional material: *Problematik des Narrendaseins*, Kunstbibliothek, Berlin 2001 (August 17–October 21). On fools, see O. M. Busby, *Studies in the Development of the Fool in the Elizabethan Drama*, Folcroft, PA 1969; W. Mezger, *Narrenidee und Fastnachtsbrauch: Studien zum Fortleben des Mittelalters in der europäischen Festkultur*, Constance 1991; I. Meiners, *Schelm und*

Dümmeling in Erzählungen des deutschen Mittelalters, Munich 1967; and *Unter der Maske der Narren*, edited by S. Poley, Duisburg, and Heidelberg 1981.

20. Könneker, *op. cit.*, pp. 253–60.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

22. See J. Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks and Society in the Spanish Netherlands*, New York 1999, p. 21. See also J. Van Lerberge and J. Ronsse, 'Verscheidenheden. Zotten', *Audenaerdsche mengelingen*, vi, 1854, p. 422.

CORRECTION. The June issue of *Print Quarterly* (p. 171) published a little-known engraving of a *Head of a Jester*, now in Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario. The authors wish to acknowledge the following information supplied by Christopher Mendez, London. In addition to the advertisement in *The Burlington Magazine*, mentioned in our note 2, the engraving was also published in Christopher Mendez's catalogue 54, June 1985, item 13, where it was described and illustrated, and where the print's Furstenberg, Donaueschingen provenance was given. This publication led to the acquisition of the print by Toronto. Our apologies for this omission. ALISON STEWART AND GREGORY DAVIES